

**Address by Father Martin Magill at the funeral of Lyra
Catherine McKee in St Anne's Cathedral Belfast, 24th
April 2019**

Embargo: 1.p.m.

Lyra McKee RIP

May I speak in the Name of the Living God.

First of all, I want to thank Dean Stephen Forde for his kind invitation to give this reflection today.

I have no idea what you Sara, Lyra's partner must have felt on Thursday night when those shots rang out and Lyra was hit and fell to the ground.

I can't begin to imagine what you Lyra's mum, and you her sisters and brothers must have gone through when Sara phoned to tell you Lyra had been shot. I can't imagine the agony of your drive to Altnagelvin hospital knowing that Lyra had died.

Many of us here in this cathedral have been praying for you since we heard the dreadful news and will continue to do so.

Since the story of Lyra's murder broke on Holy Thursday into Good Friday, there has been an enormous sense of grief and solidarity with you from many people at this huge injustice. Many, many wonderful things have been said about her including the warm and deserved tributes paid to her by the Secretary of State and by MPs of all parties in the House of Commons yesterday evening. In death Lyra, has united people of many different backgrounds, as further evidenced by this diverse congregation at her funeral.

Like so many others I couldn't believe it when I heard the 7am news on Good Friday morning that Lyra McKee had been shot dead the previous night.

I'd met Lyra on several occasions, we had kept in contact by phone, 'what's app', and Twitter. I would however have to confess that I wasn't aware of her great love of Harry Potter. I hadn't heard the term 'Hufflepuff' until I did an internet search and found this definition - 'Hufflepuff is the most inclusive among the four houses; valuing hard work, dedication, patience, loyalty, and fair play.' It struck me that the definition could just as easily have been about Lyra.

Whilst Harry Potter didn't feature in our conversations what did and it was our last exchange on Twitter at the end of March when Lyra tweeted me with a photo of herself dressed in a nun's veil with a glass of cider accompanied with these words:

'Got roped into performing as part of a Sister Act tribute act for Foyle Hospice. Hey [@MartinJMagill](#), you need any help with mass tomorrow?'

Let me give a brief overview of Lyra's life. She was born on 31st March 1990. She attended Holy Family PS just off the Limestone Road. In her early days at school, she struggled with reading and required extra support. Things changed dramatically when one of her teachers, Mr O'Neill began to read to her class *The Twits* by Roald Dahl. This was the spark that got Lyra interested in reading and then thanks to her granny Patricia Lawrie buying her each of the Harry Potter books as they were published this led to her life-long interest in Harry Potter and later on to exchanges in social media with JK Rowling.

Lyra's love of reading was further nurtured when she went to St Gemma's High School, just off the Oldpark Road also in North Belfast.

Her interest in journalism began at the age of 14 when she wrote for the St Gemma's school newspaper. Shortly afterwards Lyra became involved in a charity called "The Headliners" which gives young people a voice by using journalism and media as a tool for learning and campaigning. This project played an important part in her being awarded the Sky News Young Journalist Award 2006. After school and further education, Lyra studied online journalism at Birmingham City University graduating with an MA degree.

Over the years her writing has won her much acclaim such as her letter when she was 24 to her 14 year old self about growing up as gay in Belfast. In 2016, aged just 25, she was acknowledged internationally as an exceptional achiever with an exciting future by Forbes magazine in their 30 under 30 list because of her work as an investigative reporter. Last month the *Irish Times* featured Lyra in an article considering the 10 rising stars of Irish writing. Her memory also lives on in her [TEDx](#) talk, "How uncomfortable conversations can save lives", about the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting. Her book on the murder of Rev Robert Bradford, the Member of Parliament for South Belfast, called *Angels with Blue Faces* was due to be published later this year.

Lyra came to see me as part of her research on a book she was working on called Lost Boys. We met on several occasions and kept in contact. I knew absolutely nothing about 11 year old Thomas Spence and 13 year old John Rodgers, who vanished at a bus stop on the Falls Road in West Belfast in November 1974. They were both living in St John's Parish at that time where I am presently the parish priest and it was for this reason Lyra came to see me. By the time Lyra had told me their story and what she hoped to do, I was fully behind her. Nicola her sister who spoke earlier described Lyra like 'a dog with a bone' when she had found something that interested her. I certainly experienced her gentle, determined doggedness.

When we exchanged greetings on New Year's Day and I wished her well not only in the writing of Lost Boys but also in her search for the remains of the boys which she made clear to me was very important to her. She replied in this way:

'If that's the only thing that comes out of this, it'll be worth it. It's the only thing I really want out of it, to find them and the others.'

In the course of her investigations, Lyra had discovered that other children had disappeared and she had wanted to find their bodies.

I pray that her work will be taken up and that their bodies will be found and even more importantly that there will be no more 'lost boys' or 'lost girls.'

When I consider Lyra's determination, it strikes me that she was the embodiment of the St Gemma's school motto: 'truth and charity.'

On Good Friday, the day on which Christians all over the world recall the suffering and death of Jesus Christ we also wrestle with the mystery of suffering. For you Lyra's nearest and dearest, you came to know the experience of Good Friday in your own lives. For those of us who follow Jesus, we believe that the shedding of his innocent blood on the cross was enough - in the words of the hymn: 'the cross has said it all'. We don't need any more innocent blood to be shed. The irony could not be more poignant when we consider the signing of the Good Friday agreement which was about ensuring there would be no more deaths like Lyra's.

Earlier in this service, we listened to Matthew's account of the Beatitudes which was chosen by her family in remembrance of Lyra learning these by heart when she was a pupil at St Gemma's. The beatitude 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God' is very

timely. Many of us will be praying that Lyra's death in its own way will not have been in vain and will contribute in some way to building peace here. Since Thursday night we have seen the coming together of many people in various places and the unifying of the community against violence. I commend our political leaders for standing together in Creggan on Good Friday. I am however left with a question: 'Why in God's name does it take the death of a 29 year old woman with her whole life in front of her to get us to this point?' As Christians recalled the death of Jesus on the cross, we remembered that his death was not in vain but was for us the doorway to eternal life. I dare to hope that Lyra's murder on Holy Thursday night can be the doorway to a new beginning. I detect a deep desire for this. One of Lyra's friends was reported as saying: 'We have had enough. There is a younger generation coming up in the town and they don't need guns put in their hands. They need jobs, they need a better health service and education. They need a life, not a gun put in their hands.' To those who had any part in her murder, I encourage you to reflect on Lyra McKee journalist and writer as a powerful example of 'The pen is mightier than the sword'. I plead with you to take the road of non violence to achieve your political ends. It was encouraging to see that those who provide a political analysis to the organisation responsible for her death chose to call off their parade on Easter Monday following the call from Fr Joe Gormley, the parish priest in Creggan where Lyra was killed. To those still intent on violence, I ask you to listen to the majority of the people on your beloved island of Ireland who are calling on you to stop.

I pay tribute to the courage and determination of the women who in a very powerful gesture of non violence, one by one placed their hands in blood red paint on a wall and said loudly 'we are not afraid.' I commend the 140+ people in Creggan who have contacted the police. There is a rule in many of our communities that we do not, we should not, give information to police and that, to do so is to become a 'tout.' But that was one of a number of rules - rules that also

said that it was OK to brutalise children for petty crimes, or rules that say you can live in the locality until you are told you can't or rules that said that the only way we could gain 'freedom' was by other fellow-human beings losing their lives. But this week I have seen these rules turned on their head. I have seen many people stand up and condemn this culture of violence and coercive control. We need to send a very different message and so I appeal to those who have information about Lyra's murder but who haven't yet come forward to do so now. If you want to see an end to these brutal rules, and see a new society built on justice and fairness, on hope and not fear, then you can help build that society by letting the police know what you know. There will be special measures put in place to ensure your safety and where you will not be intimidated by coercive controllers, if you do so.

To the many politicians present in this cathedral today, let me say again those words which one of Lyra's friends had said: 'the younger generation need jobs, they need a better health service and education. They need a life, not a gun put in their hands.' As politicians you will be familiar with the first report of the Independent Reporting Commission published last October which examined in depth paramilitary style attacks and found a clear correlation between these attacks and areas of social deprivation. Lyra's friend is right in pointing out that our young people need jobs, and education and training to get those jobs. All our young people need a life that gives them an aspiration for the future. As our politicians we need you to be working together to make that happen so that especially for those living in deprived areas that they will feel the peace process is working for them as well - and especially for young people living in these communities.

To the press and media which Lyra was so proud to be part of - I ask you to report on what is being done in these areas - to praise good work where you find it and report when it is not happening.

I know you as politicians have a very difficult job to but then so too did Lyra. There is another valuable lesson from her life - she was like 'a dog with a bone' when she believed she could make a difference. When it comes to our peace process, I would love to see this dogged attitude to the rebuilding of an Assembly that works for the common good. As I listen to the radio every morning, all I seem to hear about various initiatives in Northern Ireland are these words, 'without a minister, this can't be taken forward'. I pray that Lyra's murder may be the catalyst needed for parties to start talking, to reform that which was corrosive in previous Assemblies and to begin anew.

On Easter Sunday, Christians all over the world celebrated the most important event of the Christian year, the resurrection of Jesus. It was because of his resurrection that we believe in life beyond the grave and in the words of today's second reading from John 14: 'in my Father's house there are many dwelling places.' It is in this hope of eternal life and happiness that we gather in prayer and now into the tender mercy of a loving God and Father I commend Lyra McKee.

Amen.